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#### ABSTRACT '

Six opinion magazines ("Christian Century," "Commonweal," "Christianity Today," "Nation," "National Review," and "New Republic") were analyzed for their treatment of legally recognized conscientious objectors during the Vietnam war era, 1964-72. The purpose of the study was to find how these journals reconciled their obligations under the social responsibility theory to represent fairly the viewpoints of an identifiable minority with their responsibility not to provide information about internal dissent to the nation's enemies. Conscientious objectors received substantial attention from four of these journals during the Vietnam era--24 editorials and 38 other articles. Amost all items conveyed a favorable bias toward objectors--46 were positive, 13 neutral, and 3 negative. Almost half the coverage was provided by one magazine, the "Christian Century," which supported not only traditional objectors, but also those who refused to fight on novel grounds. The thematic content of the editorials failed to support Siebert's hypothesis that "the enforcement of restraints increases as the stresses on the stability" of society increase. The evidence indicates that some editorialists exercised a great deal of freedom in defending minority opponents of United States policy during the Vietnam war. (Author/RB)

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SIX OPINION MAGAZINES' COVERAGE

OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS TO THE VIETNAM WAR

bу

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#### Abstract of

#### SIX OPINION MAGAZINES' COVERAGE

OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS TO THE VIETNAM WAR
by Stuart W. Showalter, University of Texas at Austin

Six opinion magazines—Christian Century, Commonweal, Christianity

Today, Nation, National Review, and New Republic—were analyzed for their

treatment of legally recognized conscientious objectors during the Vietnam

War era, 1964-1972. The primary question for study was this: how did these

journals reconcile their obligations under the social responsibility theory

to represent fairly the viewpoints of an identifiable minority with their

responsibility not to provide information about internal dissent to the

nation's enemy.

Conscientious objectors received substantial attention from four of these journals during the Vietnam era--24 editorials and 38 other articles.

Almost all items conveyed a favorable bias toward objectors--46 were positive, 13 neutral, and 3 negative. The coverage accelerated, both in frequency and in extremity of positions taken, as the war built to a climax in 1967.

Almost half the coverage was provided by one magazine, the Christian Century, which supported not only traditional objectors, but also those who refused to fight on novel grounds. It appealed far beyond its primary audience of churchmen for both moral support and legal acceptance of Vietnam era objectors. On the other hand, Christianity Today and the National Review, conservative in religious and political viewpoints, virtually ignored the objector issue.

The thematic content of the editorials failed to support Siebert's hypothesis that "the enforcement of restraints increases as the stresses on the stability" of society increase. The evidence indicates that some editorialists exercised a great deal of freedom in defending minority opponents of United States policy during the Vietnam War. However, a larger sample of publications will provide a fairer test of Siebert's proposition.



# SIX OPINION MAGAZINES' COVERAGE OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS TO THE VIETNAM WAP.

Conflict between public officials and avowed dissidents usually sharpens during times of war, often to the extent that the state legislates and enforces special restrictions on civil liberties. In a study of 300 years of press freedoms in England, Siebert hypothesized that the "area of freedom contracts and the enforcement of restraints increases as the stresses on the stability of the government and of the structure of society increases."

One identifiable group of dissenters, conscientious objectors, has repeatedly experienced the restrictions placed on freedom of expression during American wars. Objectors have been recognized in every major war in U. S. history as legitimate dissenters to prevailing policies, but how has the press reacted to them? This study is an examination of six leading opinion journals in their coverage of American objectors during one war, the Vietnam conflict of 1964-1972.

Editorial policies toward dissenters have evolved from numerous historical precedents, but those from twentieth century wars are most relevant to the Vietnam era. Oliver Wendell Holmes! "clear and present danger" principle, first promulgated in 1919 as a guide on whether an action or utterance constituted sedition, serves as a most applicable legal precedent. He argued that "when a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight."<sup>2</sup>

Those who have opposed American wars have based their protests on many grounds, but conscientious objectors have historically claimed the first amendment guarantee of freedom of religion as the basis for their position. The Supreme Court and Congress have generally agreed that objectors may legally refuse to bear arms, but not without performing some alternate service in the public interest.

Although governmental officials have protected the right of conscientious objectors to dissent, the press has tended to treat all dissenters condescendingly, frequently failing to recognize judicially sanctioned objectors. The World War I experience illustrates the trend: 75 publications sympathetic to pacifistic views suffered severe restrictions under the Espionage Act of 1917<sup>3</sup>, but most of the major metropolitan papers continued to publish without interference from the government because they "usually reflected the sympathies and interests of the wealthy, of the conventional and of those in power. Unpopular causes, no matter how righteous, earned no money and received scant attention." In one in-depth study, Stevens concluded that if the dissenter in Wisconsin in World War I looked to the newspapers to defend him, "his faith was misplaced." 5

Again in World War II, the press adhered closely to governmental policies in regulating the flow of public information. Zechariah Chafee, Jr., the civil libertarian, cited "the patriotism of the press" as a major factor in the success of the Office of Censorship.

Yet, press treatment of conscientious objectors did not approach the intolerant reporting characteristic of World War I. One analysis revealed that during World War II "national consumer magazines with substantial circulation tended to support the stand of a minority group [conscientious objectors] in a time of national peril."

The social responsibility theory holds that constituent groups of a society should receive fair representation in the press. The Commission on Freedom of the Press proposed that "all important viewpoints and interests in the society should be represented in its agencies of mass communication. Those who have these viewpoints and interests cannot count on explaining them to their fellow-citizens through newspapers or radio stations of their own."8

Despite the ideal of representing divergent viewpoints, the press has traditionally been cautious in granting access to groups whom they deem unpatriotic, especially during war. As two proponents of the social responsibility theory assert, "No editor, broadcaster, or film maker questions the right and responsibility to withold, for the public good, information which might help this country's enemies more than it would help the generality of the American people if it were released broadly." Conscientious objectors contribute to internal dissent, which certainly interests a nations' enemy, and they were especially vocal during the Vietnam era.

The press encountered little official censorship in its coverage of the Vietnam military activities, but government officials went to considerable lengths to manage the news. On the other hand, as the threat of an internal "Communist conspiracy" declined in the sixties, the press began to reassert a more independent stance vis-a-vis government policy while officials remained "steeped in the essentially totalitarian concepts of wartime."10 These conflicting perspectives resulted in exchanges such as the one in which a public affairs officer told American correspondents in Vietnam that they "had a patriotic duty to disseminate only information that made the United States look good."11 Many journalists, however, reacted by reporting in an even more independent vein the increasingly negative impact of U. S. policy. The ultimate confrontation, of course, followed the publication of the Pentagon Papers when the government won a temporary injunction against the New York Times and other papers to suspend the reporting of information obtained from classified documents.

In the context of a highly controversial war, the conscientious objector position became more attractive to many, primarily to young men facing conscription. Besides those who met the traditional qualifications for conscientious objector status—opposition to all wars by virtue of religious training, others attempted to qualify for alternate service by broadening the interpretation of the religious

training clause of the Selective Service Act or by having the courts recognize selective objection to a particular war, i.c., Vietnam.

This study is an examination of how one segment of the American press responded to a dissenting, but legally protected, minority group in 1964-72. The research questions that guided the study were these: Did the magazines fulfill their obligation, as outlined by the Commission on Freedom of the Press, to represent fairly these dissenters? What editorial positions did the six magazines take toward Vietnam era objectors? Were these positions consistent with each magazine's political orientation? Did the religious magazines differ from their secular counterparts in treating the issue? Did the magazines change their positions toward objectors as the war became increasingly unpopular? Did the journals differ significantly in the number and types of articles devoted to the issue?

Opinion magazines were elected for analysis because of the greater likelihood that they would treat this controversial, but relatively esoteric, topic. Further, their formats include several editorials in each issue, so the viewpoint of each journal could be more directly ascertained. A check of the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature indicated that five opinion magazines accounted for more than half the articles indexed under the conscientious objector heading from 1964 (the Gulf of Tonkin resolution) to 1972 (the final Paris negotiating sessions). 12

Pepublic, National Review, Christian Century, Commonweal, and Christianity Today. All except Christianity Today are cited by one authority as leaders of the political/religious spectrum that each represents. (Christianity Today has gained readership and prestige within the past decade and stands as a conservative rival of the Christian Century.) The magazines cover a wide range of opinion and follow similar formats. As listed, the first three are generally considered liberal-moderate-conservative in political orientiation; the second three, liberal Protestant-liberal Catholic-conservative Protestant. The National Review and Christianity Today appear fortnightly; the others are weeklies, except during holiday periods.

All articles indexed under the "conscientious objector" heading for the six publications were measured in column inches (adjusted for variable widths) to get an indication of depth. Further, they were coded on a positive-neutral-negative basis, relative to their positions toward objectors, to help determine overall editorial attitude and provide some quantitative grounds for comparisons. Test-retest coder realiability was greater than .95.

Frequency of article occurrence and categorization of direction were checked for statistical differences among magazines and across time by the chi-square test. Treatment, as indicated by space devoted to articles, was tested by one-way analysis-of-variance. In addition,

all editorials were critically evaluated to note emphases on specific features of the conscientious objector coverage and to assess consistency of position across time.

#### Results

Conscientious objectors received substantial attention from the opinion journals during the Vietnam era-24 eldtorials, 28 articles, 5 news items and 5 letters. The coverage began in 1965 (no articles appeared in post-Tonkin 1964) and continued through 1972.

Since two of the journals, Christianity Today and the National Review, are bi-weeklies, the chi-square tests affected by frequency were calculated twice, once with these publications included and once with them excluded. The significant findings held with both bases for calculation, but the lower X<sup>2</sup> values are reported as a more conservative test.

More than half the articles and 47 per cent of the total copy about objectors was carried by the Christian Century, the liberal Protestant weekly. Its performance, as indicated by the number of articles, significantly exceeded that of each of the three other weeklies (X<sup>2</sup>=30.29, 3 d.f., p<.001). In fact, when the Century was removed from the analysis, the remaining magazines failed to differ significantly from each other (X<sup>2</sup>=.31, 2 d.f.). Table I summarizes article frequency and length.

(Six Opinion Magazines, p. 8)

TABLE I
ARTICLES AND SPACE ALLOTTED TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

iagazine	Jumper of Editorials	Editorial Inches	Number of Articles	Article Inches	Total Items	Totai Inches	Percent of Total Inches
Christian Century	14	193	61	591	33	784	46.9
Christianity Today	, H	7	7	13	ന	20	1.2
Commonweal	H	10	7	272.	<b>&amp;</b>	282	16.9
Wation	2	. 11	9	330	<b>∞</b>	347	20.8
National Review	0	0	0	Φ,	<b>o</b>	O	0.0
Mew Republic	S	93	, <b>4</b>	152	10	238	14.2
Totals	24	313	38	1358	62	1671	100.0

In general, all items published conveyed a favorable bias toward objectors-46 were positive, 13 neutral, and 3 negative  $(x^2=48.92, 2 \text{ d.f.}, p < .001)$ . Only the conservatively oriented Christianity Today countered the overall trend since none of its three articles sided with the objectors' cause. The three religious magazines were only slightly more approving of objectors than the politically oriented Nation and New Republic. When editorials and all other articles were compared across publications and time for direction, no significant differences emerged.

The frequency of articles varied significantly during the 1965-1972 period (X<sup>2</sup>=19.39, 7 d.f., p ...01). However, much of this variation occurred because only three articles were published in 1965, when troop build-ups were just beginning, and two in 1972, when draftees were no longer being sent to Vietnam. The strongest variation resulted from 1967 coverage—amid General Westmoreland's request for an additional 200,000 troops for a projected total of 671,616<sup>14</sup> and widespread draft resistance—with more than one-fourth of all articles on the topic appearing then.

The five publications struck a similar balance between editorials and other articles—approximately a two-to-three ratio. In depth of treatment, as indicated by column—inch measures, the magazines did not differ significantly as checked by F tests. Thus, when the editors elected to cover objectors, they did so in similar ways, as one would expect from magazines of similar format.

#### Analysis of Editorial Positions

Cverall, the by-lined articles on conscientious objectors tended to reinforce the viewpoints expressed on each magazine's editorial pages. Although one would expect opinion cournals to buttress their philosophical positions in this way, about one-fourth of the articles were neutral, balanced pieces which assessed the issue from various perspectives. An analysis of each periodical's editorial performance revealed some qualitative differences in coverage, even among those with related political orientations.

The Christian Century launched by far the most extensive crusade on behalf of objectors, beginning even before the Gulf of Tonkin resolution had committed the United States to the defense of South Vietnam. During the eight-year period, the Century editorialized on three main themes: the response of the church and religious leaders to objectors who qualified on traditional grounds; the extension of objector privileges to those who opposed all wars on non-religious grounds; and the expansion of the judicial interpretations to include selective objectors.

From the early stages of the war, the <u>Century</u> waged a small-scale persuasive campaign with its primary audience, the ministers and lay leaders in the church. In late 1965 it noted, in ironical tones, the lack of support that the church failed to provide to its own member-objectors, men who "have taken with special seriousness"



the churchs' teaching." The editors contended that objectors, perhaps even more than servicemen, "need the pastoral guidance and care which the church can provide. The churches should either cease producing such young men or cease neglecting them," it preached. 16

Less than four months later, the <u>Century</u> chided the religious establishment in even stronger language: "The church stands afar off, ceases to be the church, lets a secular organization [the American Civil Liberties Union] become the church in its stead [in defending the objector]."

In a sarcastic vein, the writer added, "No one asks the church to become a pacifist organization; that would make it too Christlike. No one asks it to jeepardize its patriotic posture."

The point was explicit: if the church would not support its own members on this issue, then it had turned against its own best interests.

The <u>Century</u> carried two final editorials addressed to church leaders in late 1967 and early 1968. The first appealed for acceptance of the reported 10,000 Americans who had fled to Canada "to honor their conscientious objection to participation in a war they believe insane and evil." It flatly declared that these opponents represented "10,000 judgments against the country and against the churches." Churches."

The second editorial was perhaps the <u>Century's</u> most moderate statement to church leaders on their participation in dissident



activities. It called for respect for the consciences of those ministers who could not endorse the radical draft resistance tactics of Benjamin Spock or William Sloan Coffin, "particularly if their convictions lead them to active support of conscientious objectors."21

These editorials were consistent in viewpoint and directed toward those most likely to have exerted strong influences in shaping the thinking of objectors. It was a logical audience for the Century to address, but by no means the only one it attempted to persuade on behalf of the objector. Other columns were aimed at the larger public, pushing for judicial decisions that would broaden the qualifications for conscientious objector status.

Early in 1964, the <u>Century</u> applauded an appellate court decision that permitted Daniel Seeger to serve as an objector, even though he had not based his case on belief in Supreme Being. The editors held that this clause of the draft law had "offended the right and the dignity of many sincere pacifists who have been unwilling to use what would for them be a religious cliche and a subterfuge." They implored the Supreme Court to uphold the decision that, in effect, extended the interpretation of the law to include those who developed their scruples against war from non-traditional, but nevertheless religious bases.

The Century's position on this point was confirmed a year later when the Supreme Court refused to reverse the Seeger decision.



Another editorial applauded the court's interpretation: "The state has the power to draft men for military service," it conceded, "but it has neither the constitutional right nor the theological ability to define the religious basis on which some men will be exempted from service in the armed forces and others will not."<sup>23</sup>

The <u>Century</u> next advanced its crusade to have <u>sincerity of</u>

<u>beliefs</u>, not a religious orientation, provide the crucial test for

objectors. The courts did not adopt this interpretation until 1968

in the case of Shacter, who opposed all killing but was an avowed

atheist. An editor approvingly noted that the decision "acknowledges
that nontheistic beliefs can be as sincere, as deeply held, as

theistic ones."24

The third, and most sustained, aspect of the <u>Century's</u> campaign for objectors related to the concept of selective opposition to a particular war. As early as 1966, before widespread resistance to the draft had developed, the progressive Protestant weekly decried a draft law that required men to "commit what they believe to be 'crimes against humanity' or go to jail." The editorialist reasoned that the Vietnam conflict failed to meet the classical definitions of a "just war," so the nation had no right to compel its citizens to fight it.

As the war continued beyond the Tet offensive of 1968, the Century persisted in advocating selective objection while, concurrently,



acknowledging that the state had the power to maintain armed forces, levy taxes, and insure public order. Yet, the editors advocated limits to these powers: "Should a man obey the state no matter what radical evil it perpetrates?" they questioned. 26 They then pointed to the conclusions reached during the Nuremberg trials a quarter century earlier—clearly the Century believed that a man should sometimes say no to the state.

In this campaign, the <u>Century</u> editors only gained the satisfaction of knowing that they had taken what they considered to be a morally correct position. They probably overstated their case when they declared that "no greater moral gain [arose] from the Vietnam war than the emergence of selective conscientious objection."<sup>27</sup>

The periodical's position on selective objection never won acceptance in Congress or the courts. In fact, its final editorial on the subject lamented a 1971 eight-to-one Supreme Court decision against selective objectors:

This unfortunate decision must rank as one of the greatest disappointments in a generation of judicial history. Not only is it a very hard blow to the rights of conscience and the cause of peace: its logic and language are singularly unpersuasive. 28

But by this time, the war was winding down, and no draftees were going to Vietnam. The <u>Century</u> was addressing an issue that had become politically mute.



Neither of the other two religious journals covered the objector issue nearly as extensively as the <u>Century</u>, and the contrast was most apparent in editorials. Both <u>Commonweal</u> and <u>Christianity Today</u> addressed the issue only once each in their editorial columns during the eight years, although the <u>Commonweal</u> did treat the topic in seven by-lined articles.

The Commonweal's lone editorial dealt somewhat indirectly with objectors, and it was published in the early stage of the war. The editors attacked one of their own leaders, New York's Cardinal Spellman (also head of the military ordinariate for U. S. armed forces), for his anti-objector statements as much as they urged positive attitudes toward objectors. 29

Christianity Today took the only negative editorial stand against objectors among the five journals studied. In contesting a Supreme Court decision broadening the interpretion of the religious training clause of the draft law, the editorialist speculated that "a spate of legal suits filed by citizens who would like to escape the rigors and hazards of milit. Ty service" would follow. 30 However, those who met the traditional tests for conscientious objector status were not criticized. The only other coverage in Christianity Today consisted of two short neutral news articles.

Neither of the political journals approached the <u>Century</u> in editorial support for objectors, either in extent of coverage or in shared philosophical positions. However, the <u>Nation</u> and <u>New Republic</u> were comparable in their reportage to <u>Commonweal</u> and exceeded that of <u>Christianity Today</u>.



The <u>Nation</u> addressed practical political problems faced by objectors in two editorials, both published in 1967. The first dealt specifically with a medical doctor who took "his Hippocratic obligations seriously" and refused to train other medics who would extend or withhold aid from Vietnamese civilians contingent upon their support of the war. <sup>31</sup> But this case related only peripherally to the conventional arguments about questions of conscience in times of war. The second editorial reflected on the irony of objectors fleeing a country that had once served as a sanctuary for them. <sup>32</sup>

New Republic editors discussed objectors six times, but they wrote in a rather detached vein, with more concern for the political implications of massive resistance to the draft than for the ethical issues involved. They set the tone for their position in their first editorial in 1967: "Except in those cases when there is an absolute commitment to pacifism, the claim to exemption from military service is essentially a political claim."33 They added a proposal in the same editorial to "enlarge the draft pool (thus making sure there are enough able and willing servicemen), while still permitting those called up some choice of approved social duty" which would simultaneously satisfy "conscience and the national welfare."34

Two years later, the <u>New Republic</u> amplified the same theme:
"Democratic governments cannot long carry on wars that violate the conscience of large numbers of its citizens." The editorial implied

support for the rights of objectors, but its primary goal was to prick the consciences of governmental officials about the long-range political fall-out that would result from failing to accommodate objectors.

In three other editorials, the New Republic equivocated on Supreme Court decisions broadening the grounds for objection, 36 argued modestly for objector benefits patterned after those offered ex-servicemen, 37 and rendered a qualified reaffirmation of the objector position: "It might well be held [by the courts] that Congress is obliged to exempt pacifists who object to all war as immoral," but such protection of a minority should not "defeat the very power to raise armies by conscription." 38

Finally, the rightest <u>National Review</u> did not publish a single article or editorial on conscientious objectors during the 1964-72 period. The <u>Review</u> editors ignored the issue, downplaying it even more than the religiously conservative <u>Christianity Today</u>.

#### Conclusions

Four of the six opinion magazines devoted a great deal of copy to conscientious objectors during the Vietnam era, and a predominant proportion of the coverage portrayed them positively. The significance of this finding is diminished, however, when one realizes that four of the six journals are liberal to moderate in their political and religious orientations. These periodicals were simply conforming

to their known editorial positions.

More surprising was the extent to which one of the journals, the Christian Century, covered the questions of conscience raised not only by traditional objectors but also by those who objected on novel grounds. The Century appealed far beyond its primary audience of churchmen for both moral support and legal acceptance of those who refused to fight in Vietnam. Its active campaign, though based on ethical considerations, advocated the use of political means—more so than the Nation or New Republic—to broaden the grounds for legal objection.

objectors, they were <u>Christianity Today</u> and the <u>National Review</u>;
both virtually ignored the topic. Objectors, particularly those who
fled the country, would have provided excellent targets for editorial attacks by these generally pro-policy journals. Further, the six periodicals frequently engage in extended debate on the same issues;
why did not <u>Christianity Today</u>, for example, take the <u>Century</u> to task?

Selective treatment of issues is hardly new. As Breed observed, slanting "involves omission, differential selection, and preferential placement, such as 'featuring' a pro-policy item, 'burying' an antipolicy story in an inside page, etc." Jowever, given the narrow audiences that each of these publications serves, the "slanting" on this issue seems more justifiable than would be permissible for media that reach a general audience.

On a broader scale, the journals analyzed failed to confirm Siebert's hypothesis that freedoms decrease as the stresses on society increase, perhaps because the Vietnam conflict represented an atypical military and political situation. None of the periodicals sympathetic to objectors indicated that any overt restraints had been placed on them as a consequence of their coverage. In fact, as the U. S. became more entangled in Vietnam, editorial support for objectors increased. A wider sample of publications would provide a fairer test of Siebert's proposition.

The evidence from this study indicates also that editorialists exercised their independence in defending minority opponents of a nation's policy during a time of war, despite the rather tepid stands of several of the journals. The <u>Century's vigorous advocacy of unprecedented rights for potential objectors suggests that moral commitments may be as important as political considerations for some editors in establishing policies in wartime.</u>

Although these six journals encompass a wide range of opinion, further study is needed before conclusions can be generalized to other media. But this study demonstrates that at least one segment of the media took seriously its social responsibility to represent the views of a dissident minority during the Vietnam War.



#### FOOTNOTES

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11Quoted by Morley Safer in William Small, To Kill a Messenger (New York: Hastings House, 1970), p. 102.

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30"Defining Conscientious Objectors," Christianity Today (July 17, 1970), 14:21.

31"The Doctor's Dilemma," Nation (May 29, 1967), 204:677.

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